ENCYCLOPEDIA on Early Childhood Development

Fathers

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Introduction

Although fathers have received increased attention in developmental research studies, the centrality of mothers has remained largely uncontested. In several cultural settings children grow up in close contact with multiple caregivers in the family and community, but these caregivers are also discussed far less in developmental studies. The putative role of the father almost always has been viewed in terms of the breadwinner role in diverse ecological settings.

Involvement of fathers in the family beyond the role of breadwinner has been a matter of historical and socio-cultural tradition and personal choice, resulting in several options of paternal investment and developmental pathways of influence in the progeny.[1] Most of our beliefs about a father's participation in childcare draws from societies where monogamy prevails, and even these pairs are not always permanent.[2] In non-industrialized cultures, monogamous relationships are a mere 17%, with polygyny being the most prevalent form.[3] Given this historic and cultural diversity in marriage and family constellations, it becomes essential to widen the template for understanding the role of the male parent in the lives of children.

Considering other species, biological limitations have not prevented fathers among insects, birds and mammals to become intensely involved in the task of feeding. However, along with others (e.g., offering protection), feeding is one of the many activities that facilitate reproductive

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success. Among humans, the roles of mothers are more clearly defined across cultures, namely that of primary caregiver. Expectations from men who become fathers have been more variable. Over time, many traditional role expectations have been questioned and altered to suit changing economic, social and cultural needs. Although increasing numbers of women are seeking employment outside the home, they continue their role as the primary caregivers and home-makers. Increasingly, men are also stepping beyond their traditional roles to participate in childcare and child rearing. Today the ideals and practices of fatherhood are more contested and variable, and undergoing greater transition than those pertaining to motherhood.[4]

Subject

In order to understand the changing needs within families and consequent implications for children, it becomes essential to revisit and review the role of the father in children's care and socialization. Research from different species points to the fact that fathers can range from being absent parents to intensely involved regurgitating feeders for their offspring. Findings from anthropological research also indicate intense closeness to high involvement among hunter-gatherer societies.[5] Fatherhood is not a normatively fixed role but a negotiated experience due to changing family practices. Becoming a father is situated in emotional, social, and ecological domains.[6]

Examining family practices, cultural norms, and social contexts reveals how fatherhood is enacted every day and the extent of different levels of involvement and investment lead to a better understanding of the history and culture of fatherhood.

Problems

The diversity and range of situations in which fatherhood is being constructed today create multiple positions for fathers to respond to their responsibilities to family members. Ecological, economic, social and cultural demands must be addressed with a renewed and nuanced understanding of fathers (men), fathering (parenting), and fatherhood (the conceptions and beliefs).[4] In comparison with the diversity of lived fatherhood, academic understanding in developmental psychology remains rather uninformed, finding most of its inspiration from white, middle-class educated parents in Europe and America. In a critique of the discipline, similar complaints about our examination of mothers have also been addressed.[7]

Research Context

Cultural traditions and beliefs guide the roles, positioning and involvement of fathers in the family. In most parts of the world the identity of a child is intrinsically linked to the father, although small pockets of matrilineal communities provide significant contrast. In many countries the biological role of men has greater significance than their social and cultural role as fathers. The nature and extent of father's involvement depends on economic activities and cultural practices such as marriage and residential patterns, husband-wife proximity, cooperation and contribution to subsistence and level of material accumulation,[8] as well as presence of other family members. Patterns evolve in adaptation to the ecological and historical roles and relationships within cultures. Depending upon the sociocultural context, fathers may be authoritarian, nurturing, caring, affectionate, and distant or completely detached.[9] In between these socially guided themes and historically constructed guidelines, fathers go about their lives across the world, fulfilling their responsibilities toward family members with varying degrees of commitments and liabilities. Recently, the entry of the State as an important player in guiding family relationships, for instance in Scandinavian countries, where policies have essentially included the childcare component, have placed importance on the participation of the father in children's lives.

Key Research Questions

Contemporary family studies necessitate a deeper and more extensive exploration into the experience and construction of fatherhood. From macro-studies of demographics of family life to case profiles of individual fathers, every level of research could provide important insights into fatherhood. Some key questions are listed below:

- What are the universal and variable conceptions of fatherhood?
- What are the roles and relationships of fathers in different societies?
- How do family structures and institutional expectations affect father's positioning within the household?
- What is the subjective experience of fathers in different cultures?
- What can we learn from ethnographic accounts of fathers in different ecological settings?
- What are the patterns of father-child involvement in different cultures?
- How does fathers' everyday engagement contribute to children's development and wellbeing?

Recent Research Results

Today, many fathers in different parts of the world are going beyond the provider role to greater involvement in childcare. Changing attitudes, occupation patterns, trends and media reports have sustained and even initiated some of these transformations. For instance, as caregivers, fathers are active in child rearing, caring, feeding, cleaning, and offering protection to children.

While society expects fathers to be involved in childcare, yet traditional masculine expectations are for men to prioritize earning income. Workplaces continue to see fathers mainly as providers, and childcare is viewed as the mother's role.[10] These pressures produce psycho-social tensions between ideals of involved fatherhood and the material realities of men's work practices.[11]

As a result, within families, fathers often position themselves as helpers or facilitators rather than active day-to-day carers or co-parents, at the same time they identify themselves as involved fathers.[11]

These trends imply a greater negotiability of parenting roles among family members in different cultural communities. Studies also show, countries such as Russia9 and Brazil report a high level of resistance to any change in traditional roles for men and women; and in the UK[12] the 'new man' as a father is more of an ideal than reality. In India, Southern Africa and Russia, where other family members such as grandmothers are available for childcare, the role of the father has changed more slowly. From a global research study, it was found that despite an increase in fathers' participation among educated families, it was still the mother who upholds the responsibility for the care of her children.[13]

Research highlights fathers' distinct developmental contributions. Fathers' engagement in cognitive and socio-emotional caregiving contributes to children's positive development, identity formation, and sense of security.[14] Studies based in the US, Brazil and Australia describe the essential role of fathers in the lives of children. For instance, emphasis has been placed on their impact on development[15] and their uniquely male contribution to the social and personality development of children. Father-infant play, often characterized by higher intensity interactions, promotes exploration and independence, differing in quality from the interactions observed with mothers that promote safety.[16] Across the life-span, fathers play a critical role in building resilience by acting as role models in conflict resolution, meaning-making, and adaptive responses to stress.[17]

Fathers' beliefs about their roles and expectations are predominantly related to safety and security. Their subjective experiences as fathers include responsibility of providing opportunities and guidance, and expressing emotional closeness.[18] However, empirical research rarely focuses on the 'quality' of the fathering experience. Online communities and caregiving content promote strategies of self-care, social connection, and intentional caregiving practices as components of responsible fatherhood.[19] This new digital reality expands paternal identity and intensifies expectations of emotional labour.

Fatherhood as a life experience is a new theme being advocated in countries like Brazil, where the role of the father as a caregiver, a loving and affectionate figure for children, and a considerate responsible father is being emphasized. For instance, instead of socializing boys to compete for authority, they are encouraged to build empathic relations.[20] Such proactive efforts are reported in different parts of the world as well.[4,21]

Research on fathers sometimes goes beyond the biological, co-resident father to fathering in diverse circumstances. Variations in economic status and financial stability, and demands of employment have given rise to the phenomenon of 'floating fathers'[22] where fathers emigrate in search of work and are frequently not available to the family. Sometimes, the physical[23] and even social separation of the lives of men from those of women and children is characteristic of family life.[24] As a Brazilian study reports, the adult world that children engage with is largely a female world.[20]

Multiple fathering as a phenomenon is observed in several countries. However, this has different interpretations across cultures because the role of the father is socially sanctioned. 'Flexible family boundaries, as found in India and Bangladesh, allow for other members of joint families to engage in the care of children.[25,26] Where marital relationships are fragile or multiple households emerge and evolve as fathers divorce/separate or remarry, step-fathers and non-residential fathers are engaging in the care of children. In Australia, it was noted that men have been taking on the role of being 'social fathers' to other men's children as men and women are less likely to be married than in the past or men are getting older before fathering children.[27] In Southern Africa, where the fertility rate is high, and the number of off-spring is quite high, biological parents have fewer interactions with offspring. In such cases, children have 'multiple fathers' in the form of uncles, which is a role expectation of men.[24]

Children’s own narratives portray fathers as mainstays, protectors, and inspiring figures within the family,[28] suggesting paternal presence carries symbolic and relational significance beyond the distribution of tasks.

Research Gaps

Fatherhood is an experience that is important for family life, personal development and social dynamics. Another recent trend has been for young individuals, and even couples to choose not to have children. Although in earlier times this would have been related to some medical condition, this is no longer so. Increasing numbers of young people in the developed world are choosing not to have children. Why has becoming a mother or a father become so daunting for some people? One of the most significant conundrums of demographic patterns relates to fertility. Why do the poorest populations of the world have the highest fertility rates? Although some speculations are advanced,[29] these mysteries are far from solved. This, among other issues, remains an area for investigation in future research. Other areas of interest that have not received adequate attention are listed here:

1. Cultural variations in father-child relationships across the life-span.
2. Ethnographic studies on the dynamics of father-child interaction and fatherhood as a life experience
3. The impact of migration on fatherhood both for the individual as well as the family in different settings, for example, diaspora studies.
4. Studies depict employed fathers as part of a nuclear family cohabiting with children. Most studies examine employed fathers within stable, residential nuclear households, with limited attention to diverse or non-cohabiting family structures.
5. Limited studies exist on the diverse pathways through which fathers contribute to children’s development - including caregiving, teaching and mentoring, cultivating children’s social networks, and the maintenance of family stability.

Conclusions

Fatherhood is a key area of study for gaining knowledge about the human social experience of family life and future developments. For this purpose, knowing more about how societies have organized parenting and fathering is essential. We have gathered information about fathers in

diverse cultural settings and different historical periods of mankind. This provides us with information that goes beyond our own ways of doing things, and also widens our understanding of paternal roles and relationships. Research in this field must keep pace with changing social processes as well as stable patterns in the care of children by parents. In this article, we have been able to provide a glimpse of research from different parts of the world to elaborate on the variety of experiences and expressions related to fatherhood. However, a lot more work needs to be done in this regard, and we need to persist in ways that are responsive as well as informative for the future.[30] The human experience is about adaptation, and diversity has been an essential feature of the survival of biological entities; something similar needs to be understood about cultural processes as well. The more adaptive we are as a species, the better we will adapt to and survive under newer physical and cultural conditions. For this purpose, remaining informed about and responsive to diversity is key!

Implications for Parents, Services and Policy

The implications for fathers is having a better understanding of their role in providing a secure marriage, a symbolic home, and meaningful interactions for the well-being of children.

Services related to parenting should include advocacy of the rights of a father. The state as well as families should shift from the understanding that fathers play a complementary role to that of a crucial role in child development. Programs that value fathers as active caregivers, mentors, and emotional anchors are essential to sustaining their engagement.

Social and economic policies should highlight the fact that fathers are central agents in the family's well-being. This must be reflected in workplace policies, childcare provisions, and social protection schemes that recognize diverse family forms.

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